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ABSTRACT

Thorough planning is required before implementing an examination for a high school diploma. It was decided in 1977 that Alabama educators would establish minimum competencies for grades 3, 6, and 9. The competencies for grade 9 then became the skills to be assessed on the Alabama High School Graduation Examination (AHSGE), first given to eleventh graders in the fall of 1983. Students were informed of the examination requirement four years before its implementation. Curriculum validity studies were required, and a number of other issues required decisions. In Alabama, all students who wished to earn a regular high school diploma--including special education students--were required to pass the AHSGE. Special test administration procedures were developed for hearing and visually impaired students. The Alabama Department of Education chose to develop its own test, rather than to use a previously developed test. Procedures and policies were developed to accomodate special situations, while being careful not to set a precedent that might later cause legal or logistical problems. In conclusion, every effort must be made, and documented, to assist students in meeting the criteria required for graduation; both remedial instruction and documented information are important. (GDC)

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THE ALABAMA HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION EXAMINATION EXPERIENCE:

GENERAL BACKGROUND

and

PRACTICAL ASPECTS

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of Education

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NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
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The Alabama High School Graduation Examination Experience: General Background and Practical Aspects

The administration of an examination for a high school diploma is a process that must be implemented deliberately, with due consideration and with several years of preparation. Many decisions must be thoroughly thought through, be convincingly sound and also legally defensible. Even with the best of planning and considerable forethought, plans will have to be altered and modified as external forces and minute details infringe on the established process.

Whether a graduation examination is legislatively mandated or state board mandated will have a major effect on the program. Legislatures often demand that the program be implemented in a short period of time; which results in hasty decisions that may have legal ramifications. Having to purchase a test quickly, without the option to develop a test that matchs the objectives to local curricula is an example of this potentially dangerous situation. On the other hand, an advantage of legislatively mandated programs, is that funding is usually provided, which is certainly a crucial factor. The State Board of Education is the mandating body for the Alabama High School Graduation Examination (AHSGE). As a result, implementation has had the advantage of being deliberate, enabling the State Department to take the lead with extensive educator involvement. Regardless of the initiating force, many practical considerations must be addressed before test items are written and students evaluated.

Due process of law plays a significant role in decision making and implementation. Courts have not stated an exact amount of time considered sufficient for informing students of the requirement for passing an examination as a prerequisite for graduation. This notification to students becomes significant in the decision of when the students will attempt the test for the first time. After extensive research and after discussions with lawyers, the Alabama Department of Education decided to give all students four years notice of the examination required. Thus, every ninth grade student in Alabama's public schools is provided with a brochure stating the requirement of passing the AHSGE for a high school diploma, and that students will have their first opportunity to pass it when they are eleventh graders. This brochure is signed by the student and parent, returned to the school and placed in the student's cumulative record. Beyond merely informing the students of the examination requirement, they must also be apprised of the objectives that will be tested. Consequently States or Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) that implement such a criteria must delineate early in the process the objectives or competencies to be measured. Along with this necessity for establishing competencies to be assessed is the issue of who will make this determination.

In 1977 it was decided that Alabama educators would establish minimum competencies for grades 3, 6, and 9 as checkpoints leading to the graduation examination. The competencies for grade 9 then became the skills to be assessed on the AHSGE. It is important to consider checkpoints prior to an actual examination. If these checkpoints are part of the program, then the implementation of the graduation examination will most likely be delayed. Checkpoint tests were administered for two years in Alabama (1981, 1982) before the State Board of Education mandated that the graduation examination should be in place beginning in the fall of 1983.

Curriculum validity studies must also begin before the test is given. Testing students on objectives not included in their school learning is unethical at best and may possibly precipitate legal action. If objectives are not in local curricula, then a decision must be made whether to eliminate these skills from the test or to ensure that the competencies are incorporated into the instructional processes of all schools. Instructional validity studies should also be conducted to ensure that skills appearing in local curricula are actually being taught in the classroom. A plan for continuing curriculum and instructional validity studies must be considered.

One major initial decision is to determine the population to be tested. Should all students be required to take the test or is there some established criteria that would eliminate certain portions of the population from the requirement? For example, will special education students be required to take the test? The answers to these questions impact significantly on test development procedures; not so much in the content of the test but in the processes for administration. In Alabama, all students who receive a high school diploma must pass the AHSGE. Special education students who wish to earn a regular diploma, therefore, are in the testing population. Guidelines for testing these students had to be developed to delineate allowable accomodations and modifications. Large print tests, braille tests, and editing for hearing impaired have all been built into the process of development. At no time is content altered or the integrity of the test compromised.

The test itself has many factors to be considered. Time lines and philosophy will enter into the choice of whether to develop an original test specifically for the purpose, or purchasing a "shelf test" which will accomodate the needs. If an existing test is selected, care must be taken to

investigate the objectives measured and the issues of curriculum and instructional validity. The length of the test, the number of opportunities for passing, when it will be administered and security must all be considered at this time. Standard setting procedures must be established as well.

If the test is to be developed, then test and item specifications must be created and the design of the test determined. Technical assistance should be secured when necessary and procedures for piloting the items and the test delineated. The Alabama Department of Education chose to develop its own test and this topic is addressed in depth in this symposium.

When the test is administered for the first time many issues will have to be considered, sometimes unexpectedly. Grandfathering of certain students will have to be addressed. Students who get off track in their classification of grade levels may not have the same number of opportunities to take the test. Care must be taken not to set a precedent that later may cause problems.

Procedures and policies relating to the administration of the test must be specific so that all involved know they are consistent districtwide and/or statewide. Requirements may range from very strict, as it is in Alabama to a less structured nature. Test security must be addresssed and plans must be made in advance to insure this important facet of testing.

Individual issues will arise related to policies adopted. For example, in Alabama, no reading of any portion of the test to any student is allowed. An adventitiously blind student case must now be handled, keeping legality and precedence-setting at the forefront.

As the first class effected by a test mandate approaches graduation, many more details come under investigation. What will be given to students who have not passed the test and the allowing of students to come back and

attempt the test again are two such details. The well-being of the individual students must be kept in mind while also considering legal issues as well as logistical ones.

When a state or a district requires the passing of a test for high school graduation, the state or district assumes certain obligations to its students, teachers, and administrators as a result of that requirement. Every opportunity must be given to students to allow them to acquire the skills needed to meet the standards that are established. This begins by establishing the curriculum and instructional validity of the test to insure that students have been taught the skills before the test is given. After the test has been administered and student deficiencies identified then remedial activities must provide students with instruction on these deficiences. Every effort must be made and documented to assist a student in meeting the criteria required for the diploma. Although the actual instruction and administration of a remediation program must occur within the schools, the agency mandating such a remediation program does not fulfill its responsibilities by merely ensuring remediation is conducted within the schools.

An initial obligation involves returning clear, understandable reports of testing that will enable teachers and administrators to make accurate decisions concerning the instruction of students. Test results on individual students must be precise enough to inform both the students and their teachers of skill weaknesses and areas needing improvement. Summary reports should provide group information that can assist faculties and central office

personnel in curricular decisions, planning for instructional strategies, and staff development. Other reports may become necessary as counselors deal with students and parents, as well as for recordkeeping and documentation purposes. Teachers and administrators must be trained in the proper interpretation of the reports so that test results are used to their maximum potential.

Guidelines for documentation must be provided to give some consistency of information. Legal counsel should be consulted to determine the necessary details to be included in the documentation. Because courts have not been very specific in this area, judgmemnt must be used to determine when documentation will begin and the extent of information to be required. Consideration must be given to balance teachers' time required for recordkeeping and the need for documented remedial activities. On one hand, teachers should not be required to use valuable instructional time for recordkeeping and, on the other, documentation cannot be ignored and accountability sacrificed. In Alabama, the local school systems are required to keep certain information, but are allowed to design their own method of documentation. Decisions also must be made regarding the length of time that documentation must be retained for students who have passed the test, as well as for those who have not.

Another responsibility is to provide curriculum materials to help teachers teach the skills and to train teachers that may need assistance in teaching basic skills. When areas of the state or district are identified as having large numbers of students not passing the examination, support must be provided in the form of staff development, instructional materials, and on-site consultation. Just as teachers must demonstrate that they have done everything they can to help students earn a diploma, so must a state or

district show evidence of providing assistance where it is needed. The state or district must continue to ensure that instructional validity is a reality. A survey of what is being done in the schools is most advisable as well as on-site visits to verify that remediation and documentation is indeed taking place. The courts have held that to deny a student every opportunity to learn the requisite skills and earn the diploma is a violation of that student's individual rights. Alabama has extented this protection to include all administrative aspects of the examination process. Legally and morally, appropriate reteaching of required skills in which a student is deficient must occur and verification of this reteaching must exist. Then, and only then, can it be shown to the public that schools are accountable for their actions.

The purpose of a graduation examination is not to deny diplomas, but rather to ensure the acquisition of certain minimum skills. An examination should never be the sole criterion for a diploma. Remediation and documentation, therefore, must be a part of the plan for implementing a high school graduation examination.

Some of the major practical considerations that face the persons responsible for implementing a graduation examination hhave been mentioned and will be discussed during this symposium. Hundreds of details comprise each of these topics. The processes used in Alabama were solutions based on the state's philosophy, needs, population, and political and educational status. Issues need to be viewed with attention given to the unique situations, and needs of the jurisdiction that is attempting to put such an examination in place.